

MONIKA TALARCZYK

Department of Film Art Organisation
Polish National Film School, LodzImages
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Krzysztof Kieślowski's "Decalogue" as a Quality TV Series

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The text is dedicated to *The Decalogue* (*Dekalog*, 1988) by Krzysztof Kieslowski and analyses the television series through the prism of genre and contemporary television studies, including the concept of quality television. Kieslowski's series fulfills all the criteria assigned to the contemporary new generation television series, and can act as a reference point for interpreting Poland's first new generation series by HBO, *In treatment* (*Bez tajemnic*, 2011–2013). The two titles are also linked by the same Polish film tradition, i.e. the cinema of moral concern, even though *In treatment* is based on foreign format.

KEYWORDS: Polish television, tv series, quality television

Krzysztof Kieślowski's artistic film output is ever-present in film studies consciousness, but mostly within the interpretative boundaries marked by the traditions of the Polish school of the documentary, the Cinema of Moral Anxiety and European masters' cinema. Marek Haltof has aptly captured the post-mortem reception of the author of *Decalogue* (*Dekalog*, 1989) as a dispute between the supporters of Kieślowski as a "realist" and as a "mature metaphysicist".^[1] His films are rarely seen through the prism of genre, such as that of television films. In this article the aim is not to deal with the category of television film, or Kieślowski's entire body of work, but with *Decalogue* and the idea of the serial television production. These observations have been brought about by contemporary studies of quality television and the term "new generation series", promoted by English-language subject literature. The thesis here is that Kieślowski and Piesiewicz's television series, which was the crowning of a quality trend characterising Polish public television's serial productions in the first fifty years of its existence, fulfills all the criteria generally assigned to contemporary new generation television series, and can serve as a reference point for interpreting Poland's first new generation series by HBO, *In Treatment* (*Bez tajemnic*, 2011–2013).

[1] M. Haltof, "Ciągłe żywy. Wpływ Kieślowskiego na kino polskie w czasach postkomunistycznych", trans.

A. Tambor, "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2010, no. 1 (5), p. 92.

Genre

The premiere of the first part of *Decalogue* on Polish television was December 10, 1989. To apply the film's genre affiliation was a difficult task from the very beginning; the director himself used to refer to his work as "a television cycle which uses the experiences of a series".^[2] With this he was very much ahead of his time when, in the 1990s, the classic division into television films, series and serials, including soap operas, telenovelas, miniseries and anthology series, lost its currency due to the hybridization of genres. It is worth recalling that a series (*the episodic series*) was understood as a cyclical show consisting of independent closed-plot episodes with recurring characters and even settings, but each telling a separate story. In the case of a serial (*the continuing serial*), plots continued over a number of episodes, and their resolution was deliberately left hanging at the end of each episode (*cliffhanger*) in order to be further developed in the next one, or even infinitely, as in American soap operas. According to this terminology, *Decalogue* should be defined as a television episodic series, where the setting is within one Warsaw housing estate, and each episode is a closed-plot whole, though the characters cameo in various episodes.^[3] However, we know this term is not exhaustive of the phenomenon of Kiesłowski and Piesiewicz's work. It transcends television genres. According to Badowska and Parmeggiani, the *Decalogue* series is like a literary, musical or pictorial cycle, such as the Arthurian cycle, Richard Wagner's four-opera Ring Cycle, or Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovengi Chapel in Padua.^[4]

The time has come to pose the question, whether it can stand up to the level represented by contemporary film series. What new quality has been brought about by the new generation series? As Susan Cardwell would have it, from the description of the advantages of quality television:

American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music. This moves beyond the 'glossiness' of style. Generally, there is a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way. Further, the programmes are likely to explore serious themes, rather than representing superficial events of life, they are likely to suggest that the viewer will be rewarded by seeking out greater symbolic or emotional resonance within the details of the programme. American quality television also tend to focus on the present offering reflections on contemporary society and crystallising these reflections within smaller examples and instances.^[5]

[2] *A Short Film about "Decalogue"*, dir. E. Anipare and J. Wood, UK 1996.

[3] B. Staszczyszyn, "Świat w odcinkach", *"Ekran"* 2012, no. 3–4, pp. 4–12.

[4] *Of Elephants and Toothaches: Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Krzysztof Kiesłowski's "Decalogue"*, eds.

E. Badowska and F. Parmeggiani, New York 2016, p. 2.

[5] S. Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and The Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement", [in:] *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. J. McCabe, et. al., New York and London 2007, p. 26.

According to English speaking media researchers, the "television twist" happened in the early 1990s, when ABC began to broadcast of *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991), aimed at a more refined audience. The stylistic cohesiveness of the series, endorsed by the name of the director of the first few episodes, David Lynch, as well as the unusual content for a series (sexual abuse of minors, prostitution, drug trafficking, FBI activities, the paranormal) were a new quality for television, which soon found many dedicated fans all over the world. The rising cable networks focused on polished, original projects, drawing from the traditions of art cinema, and some, such as HBO, still try to maintain the opinion that this quality is synonymous with their name, although they have competition from networks such as Showtime (*Californication* [2017–2014], *Dexter* [2006–2013]) or AMC (*Mad Men* [2007–2015], *Breaking Bad* [2008–2013]). HBO has become synonymous with high-quality, contemporary and controversial television by offering culture capital aimed at a more refined audience in exchange for a subscription fee.

Are we really witnessing a "television twist"? Jane Feuer disproves the thesis of the revolutionary character of contemporary quality drama, recalling that the term *quality drama* was used earlier in reference to live broadcasts of New York theater shows by American television in the 1950s. According to her, the term should be used as a descriptive, not a historical term, assigned to productions from the late 1990s and today.[6] Polish researchers Małgorzata Major and Samuel Nowak also doubt the leading thesis about a contemporary "television twist" and the supposed new generation of television series, pointing to Polish television's repertoire. As they argue, quality drama has been the domain of public television (and Polish television as a producer and broadcaster of such material) almost from its very beginning. Quality drama, understood as a television series with a given structure, first appeared on public television, and then, much later, on cable television, a few decades ago.[7] Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (*Scener ur ett äktenskap*, 1973), ABC's *Roots* (1977), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) prove that television series have long been able to express political, social and psychological matters in an in-depth way, both in intimate dramas and on an epic scale. Nowak poses the question whether Polish series such as *Civil War* (*Wojna domowa*, 1965–1966), *Four Tankers and A Dog* (*Cztery pancerni i pies*, 1966–1970) and Television Theater spectacles realized the supposedly controversial model of quality television much earlier. Of course, the quality of Polish television was proven by such programmes as *More Than Life at Stake* (*Stawka większa niż życie*, 1967–1968), *The House* (*Dom*, 1980) or *Queen Bona* (*Królowa Bona*, 1980). In my opinion, Krzysztof

[6] J. Feuer, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV", [in:] *Quality TV?*, op. cit., p. 146.

[7] S. Nowak, "Przeciw estetyzacji. Kilka uwag na marginesie pisania o telewizji jakościowej", [in:]

Władcy torrentów, eds. M. Major and J. Bucknall-Hołyńska, Gdańsk 2013, pp. 212–214.

Kieślowski's *Decalogue* was the crowning of this trend. Long before *Decalogue*, Polish television offered its viewers short series for varied audiences: *Children from our School* (*Dzieci naszej szkoły*, directed by W. Berestowski, S. Sapiński, J. Kędzierzawska, 1968) for young viewers, *The Most Important Day of Your Life* (*Najważniejszy dzień życia*, directed by Andrzej Konic, 1974) for adults, *White Tango* (*Białe tango*, directed by Janusz Kidawa, 1981) for women. Although *Decalogue* as a series did have its genre predecessors on Polish television, it should be pointed out that it was Kieślowski who perfected the formula, boosting it with the weight of the issues and artistic devices involved. What is more, as the only such Polish series, *Decalogue* continues to be sold on DVD both domestically and abroad, and so has the potential to become the subject of analyses, verifying the thesis of the television turn in English-language subject literature.

Decalogue as a quality series

Let us return to the indicators of quality listed by Sarah Cardwell: outstanding acting, the visual intuition of the camerawork, an original score, stylistic coherence by means of recurring motifs, a serious subject, details with symbolic meaning. It is worth adding that quality television makes not the director more appreciated, but the writer or the series creator. With the new generation series' characteristics in mind, it is easy to notice that *Decalogue* fulfilled the quality criteria long before they became the desired norm for quality television. Kieślowski did admit that the creator of the series was its co-writer:

It was the idea of my writer – Krzysztof Piesiewicz. *Decalogue* itself was just a pretext. We were aiming to showcase the fact that in social life, there is disorder which demands the return of questions about the basics and the elementary values. These elementary values can be found in the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal [...] In the face of today's blending of values, sometimes it has to be said: listen, let us try to realize anew the simplest truths, because otherwise we will kill each other. People are harried and they forget about the basics, without which living is impossible. This was my initial motivation.[8]

The standards of art cinema are often cited as sources of the new generation series' quality. It was no different with *Decalogue*, whose issues and aesthetic stems from the cinema of moral anxiety, and is thus rooted in a genre considered as "the other", following the school of Polish cinema, key tradition in Polish cinema of the latter half of the twentieth century. Kieślowski as a screenplay author comes out of this genre, which he then enriched with both full-length feature television films: *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979), *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, 1981/1987) and television featurettes: *Personnel* (*Personel*, 1975), *Short Working Day* (*Krótki dzień pracy*, 1981/1996). To date, two parts of the series, with distinguishing titles, function as independent wholes: *A Short*

[8] Krzysztof Kieślowski: *I'm so-so*, dir. K. Wierzbicki, Dania 1995.

Film About Killing (*Krótki film o zabijaniu*) and *A Short Film About Love* (*Krótki film o miłości*, 1988), both of which allude to the television film formula and are under 90 minutes in length. What is more, both premiered as independent feature films, a year and a half before the television series, as the director planned from the very start to realize the subject in two versions of editing.[9] Each of the parts was written into a coherent visual concept of the whole, based on closed spaces with no escape, medium close-ups giving the impression of intimacy and fostering conversation, and sudden broad-view shots showcasing the protagonists' loneliness. At the same time, because the two parts were filmed by different camera operators, each one distinguished itself from the whole, either via colour (*Short Film About Killing* [*Krótki film o zabijaniu*, 1988], cinematography by Sławomir Idziak) or through visual equivalences with the film's subject matter, as in *Short Film about Love*, based on peeping. Similarly, because a single composer, Zbigniew Preisner, was used it was possible to achieve stylistic unity in the music stratum (indicated by the melancholic motif accompanying the theme), which was diversified with musical interpretations of selected threads in individual parts.

A direct link between the traditions of the cinema of moral anxiety and *Decalogue* was a cast composed of a generation of outstanding actors considered to be icons of the genre: Krystyna Janda, Jerzy Stuhr, Janusz Gajos, Aleksander Bardini, Maja Komorowska, Grażyna Szapołowska, Bogusław Linda and others. The characters would appear as cameos in parts dedicated to another character, showing the audience that each person passed in the street carries their own human burdens and secrets. The character played by Artur Barciś is the only one who is not the protagonist of any one part, but instead welds them together with his gaze. He fails to appear only in *Decalogue 10*, which is distinct in tone from the others thanks to the actors' comic strength and its lighter subject matter. Barciś himself never found out from the creators who he was supposed to be playing. His nameless voyeur character sometimes has more than the gesture of mere presence, as in *Decalogue 5* as the surveyor who stops the taxi carrying the murderer-to-be and gives him a nod. He always knows what is about to happen, but he usually does not interfere. It seems he is a compassionate witness.

New generation series as transmedial messages (produced by networks, but distributed online) have seen multiple mashups from the online community, equipped with graphics and film editing software. The measure of the quality and stylistic coherence of a series today is the number and variety of parodied replies from the viewers. *Decalogue* has seen such reactions, though not from the Internet, but in the feature films made by the generation of actor-directors who

Decalogue in the present day

[9] J. Lenard, "Dziesięcioro przykazań", "Film" 1987, no. 44, pp. 6–7.

appeared in his films in their youth. Parodied references are very rare in Polish cinema, especially with regard to the masters. They are the more worthy of fishing out from the turn-of-the-century productions made after Kiesłowski's death. Apart from serious inspirations, Marek Haltof pointed out those based in a parody of Kiesłowski's style. Olaf Lubaszenko, who was Tomek in *Short Film About Love*, in his comedy *Boys Don't Cry* (*Chłopaki nie płaczą*, 2000) has made clear references to the final scene of *Trois couleurs: Blanc* (*Trzy kolory: Białe*, 1994) at the prison entrance. Juliusz Machulski, or Romek from *Personel*, introduced into his comedy *Superproduction* (*Superprodukcja*, 2002) a character straight from *Decalogue's* film set, Artur Barciś' "angel-man", who appears right before the protagonist makes even the most trivial of decisions.^[10]

Finally, the meaning of *Decalogue* in shaping the quality of the television episodic series is indirectly conveyed by the first Polish series produced by the cultural giant of the genre – HBO. Admittedly, *In Treatment* was made on the basis of the Israeli formula *Be-tipul*, and its third season was based entirely on its American version, *Therapy*, but the creators of the Polish version managed to add to the series a number of native realities. Mainly owing to the cast, composed of older and middle-generation stars, including icons of the cinema of moral anxiety, such as Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, Krystyna Janda, Janusz Gajos, and younger actors who debuted in *Decalogue*, such as Maciej Stuhr. The construct of *In Treatment* can be described, just as Kiesłowski described *Decalogue*, as "a cycle which draws on the experiences of a series, or a series which utilises the rights of a cycle", reproducing the regularity of the weekly meetings of Jerzy, a psychotherapist, with his patients. The very thing that in *Decalogue* comprised the plot – traumatic events, moral dilemmas, and existential twists – in *In Treatment* become the subject of psychotherapeutic analysis. Both of these films are linked by the intimate character, the prevalence of dialogue over action, a visual composition based on interior shots with close-ups of the protagonists. What has changed is the context in which the conversations are held, although the figure symbolising this change is again a character linking different parts together. In *Decalogue* it was the silent angel-man, passing the protagonist when he was making a decision of moral value. In *In Treatment* it is the therapist, who enters into dialogue with the episode's protagonist, helping them reach the sources of an experience that has determined their life as an adult. Instead of the cinema of moral anxiety, we have the cinema of culture therapy.

To sum up, it is worth repeating that *Decalogue* fulfills all the criteria of quality, assigned to new generation series, and, in the history of quality television, it preceded the breakthrough in series production

[10] M. Haltof, "Ciągłe żywy. Wpływ Kiesłowskiego na kino polskie w czasach postkomunistycznych", op. cit., p. 102.

and distribution known as the "television twist". Still present in the DVD distribution market, it continues to inspire creators around the globe and stands its ground even in comparison with the controversial drama of new generation series. It is also worth remembering that in *Decalogue*, the audience was faced with the death penalty, incest, abortion, organ trafficking, marital adultery, empty forms of religiousness, kidnapping and Polish-Jewish relations during the War. The series still resonates with audiences, perhaps because, as Kieślowski put it, "I do not offer a recipe for life. I do not know them myself. I talk about things earlier than any rules. [...] In Poland I was criticised for referring to tradition wrongly. I tried to utilise my own tradition".^[11]

Haltorf M., "Ciągłe żywy. Wpływ Kieślowskiego na kino polskie w czasach postkomunistycznych", trans. A. Tambor, "Postscriptum Polonistyczne" 2010, no. 1 (5), pp. 89–104.

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